

## **Interview with Mr. George Johnson, Mound Bayou, Mississippi, September 1941**

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Mr. George Johnson: ???

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: [He gave us all that (?)].

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: I never heard that.

Mr. George Johnson: That's what I know.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Yeah, why? And he walked he straight like a peacock all the time.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Wore fur coat and a high hat, you understand. He knew like he should be.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm?

Mr. George Johnson: [He bring us more (?)] ??? . Anyhow cotton picking now do anything with.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. Do anything with. Make a man's ??? of day, you know. With cotton picking.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm?

Mr. George Johnson: We [gin (?)], we [gin (?)] cut throw it down on a saw and cut length. Make it short. Grind it up

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir. *[pause]* These young youth learn *[gin (?)]* long enough know how to, had a young fellow cousin Isaiah was here—

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: —never allowed *[Jim (?)]* come and pick cotton.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: No, sir. Doing the sawing, doing cotton too. In the *[gin (?)]* doesn't clean seed.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

Mr. George Johnson: Loose. Loose whole lot. Why that lent go on those seed, can't get it off. Make cotton dry. Yes, sir. *[pause]* We ??? over at the Grandmaster, that'd be a long time ago. *[pause]* *[Mr. Johnson mumbles something]* Fill up the Grandmaster.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Hmm.

*[long pause occurs before Dr. Johnson addresses Mr. Johnson with his first question]*

Mr. George Johnson: *[a woman inquires about Mr. Johnson and he answers]* Here! Okay.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, Mr. Johnson, we're going to start off.

Mr. George Johnson: All right. *[pause]* All right.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: I want you to tell me how you got your name?

Mr. George Johnson: I got my name from President Jeff Davis. He was president of the Southern Confederacy. He owned my grandfather and my father. Brought them from Richmond, Virginia. My grandfather was a blacksmith. My father was a young kid, wasn't grown. And my father had learned how to write a little bit in Richmond, Virginia, before they brought him down here. Grandpa used to keep chalk in his shop to mark ??? things; and my father take a piece put in his pocket and pass in front master Jeff's house he write on the sidewalk. And so one morning master Jeff come by and saw that writing on the walk, he go back and ask the cook, *[old lady named (?)]* Meli, Meliza: "There's writing on the sidewalk, who writing out there?" Say, "I don't know master Jeff." Say, "Come out there I show to you. I can read it." So he read it. He say, "Meliza, if you can find out who ever wrote on that walk out there, *[I carry you down (?)]* to the store and give you a free dress." She say,

"Yes, master, Jeff." So, one morning she's out, throw out some dishwater. And she peek under the dishpan and she look down and saw my father down on his knees writing on the sidewalk. She told master Jeff. Master Jeff sent for the boy to come to the shop. Come to the house, and, ah, asked him who learned him how to write? He said, "Master Jeff, I learned how to write Richmond, Virginia. A white woman learned me how to write. Before you brought me down here." "You did?" "Yes, sir." He give him a pencil and [say] "Write my name." My father's name, Isaiah. He called him, "Ike, write my name." He wrote Jeff Davis' name. He said write, "Joe Davis." He wrote, "Joe Davis." "Write Vicksburg." He wrote "Vicksburg," you see. "Ah ha, Ike, that's pretty nice for you." And he send him on back to the shop and master Jeff's son from Richmond, Virginia, and got two teachers. They opened a nice school. Educate all his niggas. And made my father a civil engineer. And then made Isaiah Montgomery his bookkeeper. And on and on they made different ones ??? farmers, carpenters, sawmills, gins and all like that. That's just because of, of, of, of my father and Isaiah Montgomery. Isaiah is born Davis' Bend. He born on, on the Hurricane Plantation. Just [giant ??? (?)] from Brierfield. I was born on Brierfield. Master Jeff had five plantations over there: Ursino, Brierfield, Hurricane, Palmyra and Lick Place. It all belong to master Jeff. And ah, had all those niggas from different places, on those plantation to come to that school. Nice school. He give them all a formal education. When they all got free, they could take care theyself. They had so much business they couldn't hire [people (?)] who got business, you just can't give a nigga a education so he can tend to his business. Everyone learned tend to master Jeff's business. Everyone admired him. Obeyed him. Don't care where he's going he obeyed master Jeff. Once master Jeff was going to landing in a buggy, in a hack. The gate was locked. That same old man I tell you about, Old Man Jack Raily, he got to the gate, say "Master Jeff this gate's locked." He say, "Oh, well, Jack, it's locked, it's my gate, break it down! It's my gate." So the boy pick it up and Jack said, "Break down the gate!" He took the fence down. And drove on through there and the wagon on behind him, you understand, with the band, carry him to the landing; and when they come back they put the fence up. That's the reason why master Jeff need his Negro. And when he met his Negro on the road first thing master Jeff look up there and see if he tip his hat to him. And everyone give him the same thing back. Give him honor. And when he come home from New Orleans up to the Bend, steamboat landing, unloaded the freight and loading cotton. And ah, he be up the bed there sleep and the captain would say, "Mr. Davis' up?" "No he ain't up." "Well, when he [come up (?)], when he wake up?" Mr. Davis wake up and he come downstairs. He pick up ??? . He pack it up out on the land set it down side his hat. And he get up there by [his boots (?)] third time before he gets his hat. He never allowed him to do it just like that. You just obey him. Well, they all obey master Jeff. The white people would alway's go up the bank and go fishing and hunting on the banks when master Jeff be in the bed sleep. They ain't never do him like that. They would always obey him all the time. White and black. They gave him honor. His best man would escort him home. Escort him back when he got ready. And ah, he was on the plantation that one day, on Lickfield Place, he told Mrs. [Coldyarn (?)] say, "Mrs. [Coldyarn (?)], I'm going home tomorrow,

don't forget to feed my niggas. When they get through ??? by the crops, let them be. Wouldn't even let them cut cord wood. But don't disturb them. I want them undisturbed. See, anything happen to any my Negroes, we to see Mr. Davis. And don't forget, I'm Mr. Davis. See, my Negroes is my summer shade. He's my winter fire. He's my umbrella. Don't disturb them." So all they live by the crops over there with the sweeps. Mrs. [Coldyarn (?)] once live by the crops with the ??? that wouldn't do no good. Wouldn't cut those vines. The Negro, the Negro master Jeff educated, one old ??? slave, live by the crop with the ??? sweeps. And he come back and he held court. And the next day he fired the white man. He wanted the place lead, lead by he wanted. He lead by the crops like he wanted, you understand? He had the crops clean, master Jeff come. With those little big sweeps, you un, going in middle. Clean them out you understand. With your ??? cause he kept those vines. Jumped those vines. Sweep. Get them all out. Clean this place out. Lick Place. He had a hundred things over there. Got all those mules from different plantation, you understand, come over and clean that place. He had plenty of stock, you know. They raised stock All this, now on Hurricane, the pasture there, oh ??? , understand, roadside you know. All that stock it belong to master Jeff. All that stock: mules, cows, horses everything else. Hogs everything else. Sheep. Goats. All belonged to him. Now he had those sheeps sheared certain time of year and bale that wool and shipped it somewhere. Same they do cotton. Carry it to the gin and packed it. Had three or four steam engines, understand, you see. Steam engine on Hurricane. One on Brierfield. One on Ursino. He had three gins. I know, he had three gin. ??? and he had a sawmill on Hurricane called, Steam Mill Quarter. And all that belonged to old master Jeff. And when he wanted things done he just put it on paper and it's gone. It done. He had no trouble at all. All his niggas had a common education. All ofthem.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: You, tell me how ah, the, how, the story as to how Isaiah T. Montgomery's father saved the plantation during the Civil War for him?

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, well, when, when, when, ah the Yankee was coming South. Look after those places down there to rob somebody. Uncle Ben see it. Uncle Ben went to old Mrs. Mrs. Irene, his wife, say, "Well, Mrs. I'm have to go Richmond. Got to see master Jeff." She say, "What you want to see master Jeff for, Ben?" Say, "I got to see him." Say, "??? No, Mrs. you can't do no good. I can't, I don't want to see you. I want to see master Jeff. I want a passport. Send me to Richmond, Virginia, see master Jeff." So they give Uncle Ben the passport. He went on to Richmond. Got some bread in his sack and went on to Richmond, Virginia. Got on his ??? where he went on to Vicksburg. On to Richmond, Virginia, and met master Jeff ??? [Mr. Johnson taps his cane to imitate Benjamin T. Montgomery, knocking on Jefferson Davis' door] "Whose that? Come in." Walk in there. "Hi there master Jeff." "Hey, Ben, what you doing here?" Say, "I come here to see you master Jeff." Say, "Ben, sit down and tell me all you know. How everybody doing?" "Everybody all right master Jeff, but something I come to see you about." "What is it, Ben?" Say, "Master Jeff, those Yankees coming South near

Vicksburg. They coming down South getting our white folks' land and robbing the niggas. Steal all the mules. And they in pursuit of Davis' land. I'm tell you what I want you to do." Say, "What is it Ben?" "I want you to deed this land to me. So I'll have it." He say, "Ben that won't do no good." Say, "Don't you belong to me? The land's mine. You mine. Why, that won't do no good." Say, "Yes, it will do, master Jeff. It will do." Say, "How do you know?" Say, "Master Jeff, can't you free me?" Say, "My God, free me, man." Master Jeff held his head down and say, "Ben you right." Sent ??? Ben up to Saint ??? coast and deed that land to him and freed him. And made notes ??? on a page, you understand. And free ??? and send him back home. And them Yankees got down to the Bend, our home there. The Yankees come, you understand. They asked, "Davis land? Is it Davis' farm?" Say, "Davis ain't got no land." "Who land is here?" "It belongs to Ben Montgomery." "Where's Ben Montgomery?" "There he is." Say, "Come here, Ben." "This your land?" "Yes, sir." "Where did you get that?" "Bought it from my old master." He called my, called Mrs. He asked her to bring those papers, you understand. Show it to him. Read these notes and papers, you understand. "Ah ha, that is your land. Now I want white folk. I didn't know no kind of Negro land. Right on!" Ran across the road; didn't bother the land at all. And when, freedom time come back, master Jeff come on home, you understand. And he met them and they give him ??? back his money. "What you doing?" "Cotton business. Cotton business." Oh ??? high this table. I ??? could show Betsy now. Right out there on Brierfield Place. On Brierfield. Right in master Jeff's house. Cotton picking, [green back (?)]. [Do (?)] that myself.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Well, this band you say that ah, ah Jefferson Davis organized for his, [recording skip] organized for his slaves.

Mr. George Johnson: Yes, sir.

Dr. Charles S. Johnson: Will you tell me a little something about that band? [record skip]

**END OF SIDE A**